



Frequently Asked Questions

COVID-19 Planning—Distribution System Monitoring

3/31/2020

Your drinking water system is critical infrastructure that must be maintained during this time. Monitoring your water system is an important part of providing safe and reliable drinking water. This includes conducting sampling, especially acute contaminants monitoring such as routine coliform monitoring and nitrate. Failure to collect routine coliform distribution samples may create another public health risk.

Just like you, our office is prioritizing resources while maintaining our critical functions. We want certified operators, in responsible charge, to make a good faith effort to prioritize their work and make sure it is consistent with our guidance. If you need more resources, please contact us.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How can we get ready for a likely staff shortage?

- Review or develop mutual aid agreements with neighboring utilities with similar treatment plants. A similar technology is more important than a similar size.
- Join [WAWARN](#).
- Cross-train existing staff.
- Make sure your SOPs for collecting samples are correct, up-to-date, and easily available.
- Collect samples early in the month.

2. How can we reduce the risk that our operations staff will become sick?

- Identify sample sites that are away from other people.
- Limit in-person meetings.
- Contact your laboratory and ask if they have drop-off sites or steps in place to allow for social distancing.
- Wash hands often and provide hand gel with at least 60 percent alcohol in it.
- Stay home when sick with signs of a fever, cough, or trouble breathing.
- Do social distancing as much as possible.

3. What if I do not collect my routine sample?

In general, ODW expects water systems to collect the samples in accordance with their monitoring schedules. If you cannot collect samples due to illness or lab availability, please contact your regional office. We will help you find resources, such as backup operators and labs, to make sure the water you are serving is safe and reliable during this emergency. We will assess each situation and prioritize public health water quality issues.

4. What should I do if I cannot gain access to my routine coliform sample sites in someone's home or other routine sampling location?

During this time, we still expect you to collect routine coliform samples from representative sites throughout your distribution system. Samples may need to be collected from other locations or

outside the home. Make sure you are following your sampling SOPs or our published [coliform sampling procedure](#).

If you are denied access to the entire water system, such as a water system serving a hospital or school, it may be possible to train on-site staff that have access to the building to collect coliform samples. Talk to the water system owner and discuss the importance of collecting the sample and the risk of not sampling. Routine coliform monitoring makes sure the facility has safe and reliable drinking water.

5. What should I do if I cannot gain access to my disinfection by-product (DBP) sample site?

DBP compliance is based off the locational running annual average, typically sample sites should not be changed. If possible, collect samples outside the home at an outside faucet. If you need to move the sample locations, try to find a location nearby. Please document why the sample DPB location was moved and contact your regional office if you have any questions.

6. What should I do if a customer will not take lead and copper tap samples?

Contact the customers that are in your lead and copper sampling plans to see if they are willing to participate. Tell them you are taking safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, like making sure staff wash their hands often, clean the sample bottles before dropping them off, and use porch drop-off and pick-up for collection. You may need to find more sample locations. Make sure to find homes that meet the sample location criteria. If you are not sure of the sample location selection criteria, please see our [Lead and Copper Monitoring](#) guidance. Please contact your regional office if you cannot collect enough samples.

As a reminder, if your system is collecting an annual or triennial set of lead and copper tap samples, samples must be collected between June and September. If you are scheduled for a six-month set, you have until the end of June to collect your samples.

7. What do I do if my lab is closed or they are no longer offering off-site drop-off locations?

ODW is working with laboratories to ensure this essential partner is still available. We are tracking the labs that are closing or reducing their hours of operation. We developed a [lab status map](#) to help you determine if your lab is open and its updated hours of operation if applicable. You can find information on how the map was developed and other information on our [lab resource page](#). You can also download an [Excel spreadsheet](#) with all the lab information. We will update the information that we receive from our lab partners, daily. You can also access the lab layer in our current [SWAP map](#) application.

Unfortunately, some labs no longer offer a courier service or alternative drop off locations. This may mean you will have to travel farther to drop off your samples at the lab. If you're considered high risk for COVID-19 illness or are concerned, you may wish to have another staff person bring your sample to the lab or reduce your exposure by limiting stops during your travel.

We recommend that you contact your lab now to find out their updated steps for sample drop off and social distancing plan. Please contact your regional office for information on labs in your area if you are not sure where to take your samples for testing.

8. If a business closes, can we briefly inactivate the system or change the population for the months the business is closed to reduce our sampling?

Maybe. The coliform population is based on an average daily population for the entire month. If the business was open the first part of March, the change may not reduce the sampling requirement at first, but could in the future.

Inactivating the system is not in the best interest of the water system as future requirements may be more difficult. Contact us if the population has reduced greatly or the facility is closed. We will work with you to change monitoring schedules on a case-by-case basis.

9. What else can we do to prepare?

- Review your monitoring plan to make sure it is up-to-date.
- Make backup plans in case you or one of your colleagues need to be isolated or quarantined. We have [updated guidance for water system staffing](#).
- Check our [main ODW page](#) for guidance from us and leading professional organizations.
- Stay safe and look out for each other. Working together, we'll do our part to help keep our community safe.

If you have more questions, please call your ODW Regional Office:

Eastern Region	Northwest Region	Southwest Region
509-329-2100	253-395-6750	360-236-3030

Additional COVID-19 Resources

- [DOH Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) webpage](#)—daily updated information and resources.
- [Local Health Jurisdictions](#)
- [Workplace and Employers](#)
- [Persons Who are at Higher Risk for Serious Illness](#)
- [Communities and Community Organizations](#)
- [Stigma Reduction](#)
- [How Can I Be Prepared for a COVID-19 Outbreak?](#)